

What Difference Does It Make?

When I was in my early teens, I used to keep a diary. Well, that is not really true. I kept a diary for the month of January and maybe into the month of February. It seemed to me that when people kept diaries, they always had something profound to say. I discovered, for me, it was sort of a “got up, went to school, went to work, had supper, did my homework, and went to bed.” Each day was sort of ditto, ditto, ditto. So, after a couple of weeks of that, I gave it up.

But, years ago, I went back home when we were moving my father down to Texas to live with us. We cleaned out his apartment, and I found some of those diaries I had written years ago. In one of the diaries, I discovered that on a Tuesday evening, I had gone to hear a man preach, and his name was Dr. Harry Ironside, the pastor of a large church in Chicago. I look back at that, and I wonder why I went on a Tuesday night to hear somebody speak. I certainly wasn't that religious. Sunday was one thing, but Tuesday was another. But at any rate, I came home and I entered into my diary this question: “Some people speak for an hour and it seems like twenty minutes, and others speak for twenty minutes and it seems like an hour, and I wonder what the difference is?” I guess I have spent my life trying to answer that question. What is it that makes one speaker interesting and another dull? What is it that makes one speaker the kind of person you want to hear again and another you would rather avoid? You know, what makes a good speaker interesting? That is a question that any thoughtful person asks and especially if you have to do the speaking.

So, what we have been trying to do is to say, well, there is a way of putting together a talk that relates what we have to say to the people who have to listen. What we are trying to do is to take voluntary attention and turn it into involuntary attention. When people listen to us, we get up to speak, and they listen because they have to listen. Otherwise they are an unruly mob. What we want to do is to get them to listen because they want to listen. They start with voluntary attention, and then it becomes involuntary if we do our work well. They don't even think about the fact that they are listening. They just do. That is the kind of person who will talk for an hour and it seems like twenty minutes. So, what we are trying to do is to relate what we have to say to the way an audience has to listen.

Recap: Stages 1–4

Do you remember the steps that we have talked about thus far? We have said that the first step is the “Ho-hum” step—that when you get up, you don’t dare assume that people are eager to hear what you have to say, even if you get a flattering introduction. You don’t necessarily believe it, and the audience doesn’t either. No, you want to begin by going for an interesting statement. You want to go after the audience’s mind right away. Then, if you have done that, the second thing the audience asks is, “Why bring that up?” What you want to do is to surface a need. Tell them when you begin why, if they will give you the next 30 minutes, you are going to do something that will help them in their lives. Relate what you have to say to a felt need of the audience. If you have created a need, that is, if you have gotten them to itch, then they want you to scratch it. So, the question they ask is, “What is your big idea? What is your solution to the need you have brought up?” What you want to do is state the basic idea of your sermon or of your talk or of your lecture. The folks have a right to know what you are talking about and what you are saying about what you are talking about. So as you are developing it, be sure to center everything you are saying around a single driving idea. Try to nail that home in the audience’s mind as you are developing the idea.

The fourth thing that people ask again and again and again is, “for instance?” or “for example?” What you want to do as you are developing your talk is to give people something concrete, something specific. Help them to see what you are talking about, and you do that with illustrations, with examples. We were saying that anytime you are developing a point in your talk, there is only one of three things you could do. You can explain it, you can prove it, and you can apply it. We said there were three questions. One question is, “What does that mean?”—that is explaining. The second question, “Is that true? Do I really believe it?”—that is proving. The third is, “So what? What difference does that make?” So, as you are developing your talk and you come to the end of your talk, the audience wants to know, “So what? What difference does that make?”

All of us have heard talks or sermons, which were interesting and maybe even moving, but you had no idea when the talk was over what you could do tomorrow as a result of what you heard today. Or, a person is making an important point, they tell you it is important—you think it is important—but you don’t really know how to put that into practice. You can give people an illustration

of how that would work. That is what a good illustration is able to do.

Stage 5: So What?

By the way, that brings me to that last point of development. We were just talking about the “for instance,” using illustrations to explain, to prove, to apply. But, if you think of the last question that an audience asks after the “Ho-hum” and “Why bring this up? What is your big idea?” and the “for instance,” the last thing they ask is, “So what? What difference does this make?” Try to answer that for the points within your talk, but you also want to do it at the end of your talk. You want to show people how to put this into practice.

On my desk at the seminary where I teach, I have a little saying framed. It is a bit of doggerel. It says, “As Tommy Snooks and Betty Brooks were leaving church on Sunday, said Tommy Snooks to Betty Brooks, ‘Tomorrow will be Monday.’” That has got to be the ultimate low of social conversation. But, for someone like myself who preaches or teaches, it’s the ultimate high.

When people come to listen to you give your talk, they hear you on a Tuesday night, but tomorrow is Wednesday. They want to know, “How can I put this into practice for the rest of the week?” or, sometimes, “for the rest of my life?” The best speaking gives people some specific ways of taking the idea and putting it into practice. Put it this way. Suppose after you spoke, somebody came up to you and said, “Oh, that is very interesting, and I think I understand you and I think I believe you, but how do I really put that into practice where I work or in my home or with my children?” What would you say? If you can’t answer that, then chances are your talk may be irrelevant. And if you can answer that, then answer it and put that into your talk. People want to know how to put something into practice.

Now to be fair, not every talk or every sermon can be put into practice in Monday morning’s world. The concepts your preacher may preach on a Sunday, or that you may use in talking to an audience, may not be something that the next day people can dress up in overalls, or put into a business suit, or put an apron around, and actually use it. Sometimes what we are doing is we are giving people a concept that they will use sometime in the future.

I spent a number of years in the state of Oregon—a very beautiful state. They have mountains. And as you go up into the mountains of Oregon, you will see a sign that says, “Beware of falling rock.” I often wondered about that sign. You’re driving along the highway, you look up, and you see these huge boulders. And if they begin to fall, I mean they are falling rock, you might look up and beware of them. There they come and, “Ahhh!” Down you go. Falling rock would destroy you. It always seemed to me to be an unnecessary sign, because if you see falling rock, what do you do about it?

But, if you think about it, when we talk to folks, sometimes what we are trying to do is to help them avoid falling rock sometime in the future. This concept we are trying to get across is something that they will be able to use, maybe not tomorrow or the next day but someday in the future. Well, how would you do that?

One way of doing it is what people in communication call “visualization.” Visualization is a way of projecting people into the future, into a situation in which what you have said, they may be able to use. You have to have two things if you are going to visualize. One is, it needs to be a possible situation. It is even better if it looks like a probable situation. What you are doing is getting people to picture some situation in which they will use what you have been telling them.

For instance, let’s suppose you are a Christian and you are talking about the forty-sixth psalm. Great psalm. It says, “The Lord is our refuge and strength an available help in the time of trouble” (v. 1)¹. If you look at the psalm, you will see that it is divided into three stanzas. At the end of the second and the third stanzas, there is a refrain. It says, “the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our strength” (vv. 7, 11). You are talking to people about that psalm.

The major idea is that God is our refuge and strength, an available help in the time of trouble. And then the refrain, “The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of even Jacob is our strength.” Who is the Lord of hosts? Well, the phrase refers to the God who made the sun, the stars, and the planets, the hosts of the heavens. It also refers to the God who has a myriad of angels to do His bidding: those heavenly hosts. It is a way of saying that He is the God of power, the God of might, the God who names the stars and sets flaming suns into the vaults of heaven. It also says, “The God of even Jacob is our strength.” Jacob, who is nobody’s candidate for

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are the lecturer’s own translation.

man of the year, was a conniver. He wasn't what we normally think of when we think of a pious and devout person. No, a lot about Jacob made him into a deceiver. Not the kind of person you would think lived a righteous life. But the point of the psalmist is that this God who is the God of the hosts is God of a man like Jacob—a very unlikely man. Anyway, that is how the psalm develops. “The Lord is our refuge and strength, an available help in the time of trouble.”

What kind of God is He? He is the Lord of Hosts, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the angels. What kind of God is He? He is the God even of a chap like Jacob. A fellow who in many ways made a mess of his life and in many ways seemed to be going away from God, but a man who wrestled with God and God wrestled with him. Jacob was made weak in order to be made strong. That is the talk.

So the question is, “Where would you use this?” Well you might use it tomorrow, but it may be that there are folks there who are not really facing a crisis in life but you want to visualize this for them. You want to give them a, “So what? What difference might this make?” So you might say to the audience:

I don't know when it happened, but I can imagine it happening in the middle of the night. The phone rings and you are awakened from a deep sleep, and you grab hold of the telephone and you put it to your ear hardly awake. And then a voice at the other end tells you that someone that you love very deeply, someone who is the security of your life, somebody that you thought you could never live without has been suddenly taken. Gone! You hear the news. You mumble something like, “Thank you.” You ask for a bit more explanation. By this time you are wide awake. You put that phone back on its cradle, and you know that your life from here on out will be changed and will never be the same. It is going to be different. You may be filled with grief; you may be filled with fear; your heart may quiver. But perhaps at that moment in the darkness of that hour, you will remember what the psalmist said, “The Lord of Hosts is with you, the God of even Jacob is your strength. The Lord is your refuge and strength. The Lord is an available help in the time of trouble.” That does not mean that there will be no grief. It does not mean that there will be no questions. It does mean you don't have to go it alone. God Himself will be with you.

That is visualization. That is the way of taking the concept and putting it into the stuff of life. So whatever your talk is, give them

a, “So what? What difference does it make?” Give them several if you can. Give them a way of taking what you have said and putting it into practice. Good speakers do that.

An Audience-Oriented Outline

At any rate, that is the outline. You begin with the “Ho-hum” and there is an interesting statement.

Then there is the, “Why bring this up?” You surface a need.

“What is your big idea?” And you, in that talk, tell them what your idea is, tell them what it is you are driving at. As you develop the talk, you respond to the, “For instance?” “For example?” And be concrete, down to earth.

Finally, “So what? What difference does it make?”

Remember that diagram I gave you of the two islands? The “Ho-hum”—you have an interesting statement, you light a fire. “Why bring that up?”—and then you build a bridge between where you are and where the audience is and bring them across. Then, when they come across, you show them your treasure: you give them your idea. And then by the use of specifics you open up that treasure and you show them the particulars inside that treasure chest. The final one, and what you do is, as that audience goes back to their island, their time with their children, back to their job, back to the crabgrass in their yard—all of their stuff of life—you give them something to take with them. They go back across that bridge and practice what you have said. That is an audience-oriented outline.

You can look at it another way. If you think of a logical outline, then the first two steps—the “Ho-hum” and “Why bring this up?”—that really forms your introduction. A good introduction gets attention, surfaces needs, and helps people know where you are going.

The answer to the question, “What is your big idea?” is what the whole talk is about. A number of different times, you tell them what that idea is. You remind people of it, even when they have forgotten the specifics. They need to have that in mind. And then what you want to do is to enforce that with the specifics and end by showing them what you have said makes a difference in their

lives. It will work.

And the last point, “So what? What difference does it make?” is your conclusion. The illustrations and the idea are the body of your message. The conclusion gives people something they can do tomorrow as a result of what you have said today.

So next time you get a chance to speak, as you work with your content, think of your listener. Work with it logically, but work with it psychologically. Give them an audience-oriented outline and see what a difference that can make.